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RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 2273
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ JAN 0322
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SUBJECT: CORREA AND URIBE ANNOUNCE DEAL ON SPRAY STUDY

1. (SBU) Summary: President-elect Rafael Correa of Ecuador and President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia announced an agreement on January 10 to conduct a tripartite study of the aerial fumigation of coca crops in Colombia along the Ecuadorian border. The study would be conducted by representatives of each country and an international organization, possibly the OAS or UN. Outgoing Ecuadorian FM Francisco Carrion immediately and publicly criticized the accord on January 11, calling it "a step backwards" for Ecuador. The hasty accord reflects Correa's decisive (and impulsive) leadership style, and his eagerness to smooth things over with Uribe. We will continue to encourage him to do so. Uribe's attendance at Correa's inauguration, though unconfirmed, would offer the next important opportunity to do so, even more so if Uribe is prepared to say the current round of fumigation has been completed. End Summary.

The Agreement

2. (SBU) The agreement was reached directly between the two heads of state in Managua, during a half-hour meeting on the margins of the Ortega inauguration, on January 10. In announcing the verbal agreement to the press, Correa described the agreement as "a huge step forward" for bilateral relations. The tripartite commission, he said, would include representatives of "Ecuador, Colombia, and the OAS or UN, with the objective of determining whether fumigation on the Colombian side of the border has no effect on the Ecuadorian side, and if not, to take appropriate measures." The GOC would be required to inform the commission of any spraying in advance, so the commission could confirm any effects on the Ecuadorian side. The agreement would not preclude Ecuador from pursuing international claims for compensation for damages, he said. The commission would decide on the GOC's request that the GOC suspend fumigations within 10 km of the border, he said.

3. (SBU) In their initial and subsequent public statements, Correa and his FM-designate Maria Fernanda Espinosa described the accord as including the following elements:

-- Formation of the tripartite commission, consisting of representatives of the GOC, GOC, and the OAS or UN.

-- Advance Colombian notification to Ecuador each time spraying near the border is initiated, to permit observation by commission inspectors.

-- Eventual agreement to terms of reference of a prospective study of health effects of glyphosate.

-- Taking of testimony from persons who believe they are affected by the spraying, on both sides of the border.

Carrion Critical

¶4. (SBU) FM Carrion, just back from an inconclusive OAS Executive Board meeting in Washington on January 9 where he presented GOE complaints about Colombian fumigations, was quick to criticize the accord for departing from the Palacio government's policy of "firmness and dialogue" with Colombia.

No doubt stung by appearing to have been ineffectual in his own efforts to solve the problem, he said by engaging in dialogue without any Colombian commitment to return to its 2005 written agreement with Ecuador to suspend spraying indefinitely, the new agreement represented a "step backwards" for Ecuador. It would be a mistake to permit OAS representation (vs. the UN) on the tripartite commission, he suggested, since the OAS had already concluded that glyphosate spraying was safe. The Palacio government would maintain its policy of withdrawing its ambassador from Bogota until spraying stopped. It would be up to Correa to decide whether to return Ecuador's ambassador to Bogota. Press noted that then-president Lucio Gutierrez made a similar agreement with Uribe in 2003, but the joint study was never realized.

¶5. (SBU) FM-designate Espinosa defended the accord against Carrion's criticism, saying "the position of president Correa and the new government has been very firm, and will continue to firmly defend the health of Ecuadorians living near the border and the environment of this region."

Colombian MOD Stirs Pot

¶6. (SBU) In interviews with Ecuadorian press, Colombian MinDef Juan Manuel Santos confirmed that USG-financed fumigation efforts would continue, saying only 1,000 of 13,000 hectares of FARC coca plantations remained to be eradicated. He said the GOC would reinforce its presence along the border by sending a 400-man battalion to the border region during the week of January 15, and as of February, 3,100 workers would begin manual eradication in 10 Colombian departments. Santos lamented that the GOE had collaborated less with the GOC on border issues than Peru had, but expressed hope for better cooperation from the Correa government. He reaffirmed GOC claims that coca crops are being cultivated in Ecuador, and said the location of the crops had been shared with Ecuadorian police counterparts.

¶7. (SBU) Asked if he thought the closure of the Manta FOL in 2009 would hurt Colombia, Santos said he did not think so, since GOC intelligence and actions against illegal armed groups did not depend upon the existence of a base in Ecuador. "The U.S. has its own activities; we do not depend solely on them."

Comment

¶8. (SBU) Neither we nor our MFA counterparts have yet seen any official document defining the announced presidential accord. The unconfirmed verbal agreement reflects Correa's impulsive but decisive style, and demonstrates an eagerness to advance the fumigation issue sufficiently at least to permit Uribe's attendance at Correa's inauguration. Carrion's criticism could cost Correa and his incoming foreign policy team, fueling speculation here that his decision was hasty and without full consideration of the consequences, but if spraying ends shortly the issue could go away for awhile. Nevertheless, the accord, if confirmed, appears to clear the way for Uribe's attendance at the Correa inauguration on January 15, offering an important opportunity for further progress.

JEWELL